

Pre-war Military Planning (Austria-Hungary)

By [Günther Kronenbitter](#)

Austria-Hungary's General Staff enjoyed a monopoly on war planning. Its long-time Chief Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf worked hard to improve the Habsburg Monarchy's war preparations and the basic features of Austro-Hungarian war plans were shaped by his ideas. The unfavorable strategic situation and inadequate military resources made it particularly difficult to conceive coherent plans for deployment and operations. Grippled by notions of the supremacy of the offensive, the Viennese General Staff failed to take the consequences of modern firepower and the importance of logistics properly into account.

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Introduction: The General Staff and Its Chief

Responsibility for war planning in [Austria-Hungary](#) rested with the General Staff.^[1] In theory, its chief assisted the minister of war, but his position was much stronger than this might suggest since he reported directly to the emperor and had a high degree of leverage in all questions of military policy. His brief included oversight over all aspects of war preparations, ranging from the training of officers and troops to fortifications and [logistics](#). The core of his assignment was to take care of all issues of mobilization, the order of battle and operational plans for Austria-Hungary's armed forces. [Naval war](#) planning was nevertheless run by the Admiralty in a rather independent fashion, since cooperation between navy and army in case of war would be limited to small-scale operations along the seaboard. But unlike the minister of war, the Chief of the General Staff would not only look after war preparations for the common k.u.k. (*kaiserlich und königlich*, or imperial and royal) army but also those for the *Landwehr* and the *Honvéd*, the defense forces of Austria and Hungary. Only [Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria \(1830–1916\)](#), the official commander in chief, and [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863–1914\)](#), the heir apparent and since 1913 Inspector general of all armed forces, held sway over the different branches of troops.^[2]

In 1906, at the behest of Franz Ferdinand, Francis Joseph replaced his septuagenarian age-mate [Friedrich von Beck-Rzikowsky \(1830–1920\)](#) with fifty-four year old [Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf \(1852–1925\)](#) as Chief of the General Staff. Conrad, who constantly pleaded for an assertive foreign policy and advocated preventive war against [Italy](#) or [Serbia](#) on a regular basis, was sacked in late 1911 for overstepping his competences. After only one year, as a major war seemed imminent in late 1912, [Blasius Schemua \(1856–1920\)](#), his replacement was ousted and Conrad reinstated. Since neither Francis Joseph nor Franz Ferdinand made an effort to scrutinize the war plans, it would be Conrad who shaped the way in which the Austro-Hungarian armed forces were to be mobilized and deployed in 1914. Considered a brilliant expert in [tactics](#), Conrad might not have been the most obvious choice for a position that required a focus on planning operations. However, successful leadership in

maneuvers and advocacy for resolute action against Italian [irredentism](#) recommended him to Franz Ferdinand. Very soon, Conrad would become popular among younger, ambitious officers who considered him an energetic military leader and a fearless advocate of strong armed forces and of an assertive foreign policy. A critic of military traditionalism, the Chief of the General Staff set out to prepare Austria-Hungary's forces for [modern war](#).^[3]

Conrad could rely on a decently organized and prestigious element in the Habsburg Monarchy's military apparatus. Emulating the Prussian model, the Austro-Hungarian General Staff had become an institution of professionalized and centralized war planning under the auspices of Beck. What Conrad would do was to build on these achievements, to expand the structure and to get budget increases, although modest ones. In 1911, there were 669 officers working at the General Staff with five generals among them.^[4] Most of them had graduated from the *Kriegsschule*, or War School, in Vienna where officers were trained in a broad range of subjects but with a focus on tactics and operations. The system of educating and selecting future General Staff officers was fiercely competitive since it was meant to produce military leaders. Scandals like the Hofrichter affair, when an attempt to poison comrades in order to achieve promotion was detected, or the Redl case cast a poor light on the morale of the Habsburg army's future elite. The setbacks in the opening campaigns of 1914 also inspired harsh criticism of teaching methods at the *Kriegsschule* that would inspire unrealistic expectations and overambitious leadership in battles and operations.^[5]

There is no denying that Conrad, while striving to modernize the army and its leadership, misread the evidence about future wars and learned the wrong lessons from the fighting in [South Africa](#) 1899-1902 and Manchuria 1904-1905. He never questioned the supremacy of the offensive as the only viable solution to tactical and operational problems, although a broad range of reports from the far-flung battlefields had provided the Viennese General Staff with ample information about the devastating effects of modern firepower on attacking forces. But just as in most other expert circles, the Habsburg Monarchy's military elite made new experiences fit in with traditional concepts by focusing on psychology. That the power of will would carry the day was a widely shared assumption. Conrad had called for out-flanking and eventual envelopment as recipes for victory on the battlefield in his previous writings on tactics; now, as chief of the General Staff, he showed a similar penchant for pincer-like offensive operations.^[6] On both levels, tactical and operational, Conrad pleaded for taking and keeping the initiative as the only way to prevail in [modern warfare](#). Not least by making promotions dependant on the successful implementation of ideas like this in maneuvers, the Chief of the General Staff instilled his notion of modern warfare into the minds of military leaders. In line with most experts, Conrad was an ardent follower of the "cult of the offensive" that had gripped general staffs and war academies for decades.^[7]

Strategic Situation and Deployment Plans

What set the Austro-Hungarian army apart from the land forces of other European powers, was the Habsburg Monarchy's unfavorable strategic situation that made attacks with high casualty rates and over-extended lines of communication particularly dangerous. The complexities of the Dual Monarchy's political system had impeded a military build-up until 1912-1913, when the [Balkan Wars](#) led to a consensus among elites in Vienna and Budapest that more men and more modern arms would be needed to keep Austria-Hungary safe. Some progress would be made by 1914, but since most the other major and lesser powers of Europe also took part in this [armaments race](#), military resources still looked inadequate when the [July Crisis](#) began. Field [artillery](#) was perhaps the most obvious problem child but a lack of reserve formations would soon turn out to be just as awkward. These shortcomings might have counted for less had it not been for the Habsburg Monarchy's difficult position in the international system.

Among the Great Powers of Europe, Austria-Hungary had to face the least favorable strategic situation on the eve of the [Sarajevo assassination](#). With the exception of [neutral Switzerland](#) and its ally [Germany](#), the Habsburg Monarchy was surrounded by potential adversaries. Italy and [Romania](#) were allies on paper, but unreliable ones and just about to forge close ties with [France](#), [Britain](#) and [Russia](#). [Montenegro](#) and Serbia, victorious in both Balkan Wars, and Russia were considered downright hostile by Austria-Hungary's leaders. Therefore, a multi-front war seemed to be a quite realistic possibility if a major conflagration were to happen. Under Conrad's predecessor Beck, the political situation had allowed for one-front plans but this was longer feasible. Given the shortcomings of Austro-Hungarian armaments, both in terms of [weapons](#) and manpower, it proved to be difficult to engineer adequate solutions for multi-front scenarios. But this was only part of the problem Conrad and his staff had to face. The main challenge to the General Staff in Vienna was to make sure that there would be enough flexibility built into mobilization and deployment plans to react to sudden changes in the strategic situation in the case of an armed

conflict. Therefore, Conrad and his team had not only to develop separate plans for war against Italy (Case I), Russia (Case R), Serbia (Case B) or Russia and Serbia (Case R+B) – not to mention those for fighting Montenegro or Romania that were drafted in 1913-1914, in response to political crises - but also to come up with ideas how to react in case of an intervention of, say Russia, in the early stages of a war against Italy and/or Serbia.

The Viennese General Staff decided to split up Austro-Hungarian troops into three different striking forces. There would be 48.5 [infantry](#) divisions available for the field army according to mobilization plans for 1914, eight of which were meant to form Minimal Group Balkan (Fifth and Sixth Armies). The two corps in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Dalmatia (XV and XVI) and the Croatian corps (XIII) would be assigned to Minimal Group Balkan. It would defend Bosnia-Herzegovina and Dalmatia or assist in an attack on Serbia and Montenegro, depending on the circumstances. Since it would undermine Habsburg rule over South Slav lands, evacuating the southern parts of Dalmatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina was not an option, even if geography, railway communications and fast Montenegrin mobilization might have suggested as much. An active defense of the southern parts of the realm could be staged by the Fifth and Sixth Armies but in case of an offensive reinforcements would be needed. B-Group (Second Army) would include two Hungarian corps (IV and VII) and two Bohemian corps (VIII and IX) and it could be deployed against Serbia or against Russia. As a swing force it was essential to the quest for flexibility. Ahead of B-Group, at least twenty-eight infantry divisions of A-Group – more than half of all field army divisions – would be deployed either against Russia or Italy.^[8]

In 1914, the basic deployment pattern of the Austro-Hungarian forces did not live up to pre-war expectations. Sure enough, when war plan B was set in motion in the last days of July, partial mobilization worked well and the troops of corps XIII, XV and XVI were assembled along the southeastern border while B-Group with four corps was brought to the [Balkan theater](#). On top of this, corps III from Graz was mobilized right away to strengthen the Habsburg forces' hand. All in all, eight out of sixteen corps mobilized against Serbia – too many if Russia decided to join the fray early on. With Russia's intervention looming and under German pressure to shift from Plan B to Plan R + B, Austria-Hungary switched to general mobilization on 31 July. A-Group had to be transported to the northeast first, before railway capacity could be used to shuttle the Second Army from the southeast to Galicia. Without enough time to make a difference in the opening campaign against Serbia, B-Group would reach the northeastern theater too late to shift the balance there in the early stages of the war. This certainly made an already daunting task even more difficult to accomplish. Although political considerations were to blame for the belated pivot to Galicia in the first place, deployment plans and rigid railway transport schedules played a role as well. That logistics were considered to be a minor matter among the experts in the Viennese General Staff quite certainly did not contribute to an efficient deployment.^[9]

War Plans and Germany's Role

The most prestigious branch of the General Staff was the *Operationsbüro*, or Bureau of Operations. Overall planning for different war cases would be coordinated here and this included not only mobilization and deployment but the outline of operations in the opening campaigns. War plans had existed long before Conrad took the helm in 1906, but he set out to revise them.^[10] Since he supported the idea of preventive war against Italy and had worked on plans for operations against the southern neighbor when he had been commander of an infantry division in the Tyrol (1903-1906), War Case I was the first to be overhauled and altered. In order to defend the Tyrol, Conrad favored an attack based on alpine fortifications southeast of Trento. He hoped to slice through Italian defenses in the northern Veneto region and to envelope troops deployed further east that would also be attacked by Habsburg forces operating west of the Isonzo River.^[11] These plans had to be shelved when Italy intervened in 1915, because the Habsburg army was unable to face the former ally with more than just a defense force. Nevertheless, the main features of the plan were not forgotten and inspired the ill-fated offensive in the Sette Comuni area in 1916, the so-called *Strafexpedition*.^[12]

Although deteriorating relations with Montenegro and Romania forced the Austro-Hungarian General Staff to devise plans for wars against both Balkan neighbors before 1914, the fight against Serbia and/or Russia commanded a much higher effort on planning.^[13] With regard to War Case B, Conrad approved of an offensive against the northwestern parts of Serbia, a mountainous terrain that was unfavorable to sweeping operations. In 1914, geography's implications for logistics became all too obvious and after two humiliating defeats, the focus on northwestern Serbia instead of the area around Belgrade drew criticism. This seems sound from an operational point of view, but the great advantage of the approach taken by the General Staff lay in the fact that by amassing troops there, Serbian attacks on Bosnia-Herzegovina could be thwarted. Since keeping control over

the South Slav provinces was deemed essential, this concept of operations had its merits.^[14]

The Habsburg Monarchy had no experience of fighting Russia's army, but it was clear enough that in terms of troop numbers, the tsar's forces would enjoy the advantage of crushing superiority. The first detailed war plans in the 1870s were dedicated to an armed conflict with the northeastern neighbor and in the 1880s Beck put a lot of effort into preparations for a war against Russia. An important part of this effort went into a massive improvement of railway communications to Galicia and within the northeastern crown land. When it came to planning operations, Beck had to find common ground with [Helmuth von Moltke \(1800–1891\)](#), his counterpart in Berlin. The Dual Alliance of 1879 offered the political basis for talks between Moltke's deputy, [Alfred Count Walderssee \(1832–1904\)](#), and Beck in 1882. The Prussian Great General Staff, in charge of German war planning, offered support in case of a war against Russia. A pincer grip, with Germans forming the left (northern) and Austrians forming the right (southern) jaw, was envisaged. When Conrad reinvigorated military cooperation with the Germans in 1908-1909, [Helmuth von Moltke \(1848–1916\)](#), nephew of the victorious military leader of Königgrätz and Sedan fame, was Chief of the great General Staff. As Conrad learned about the basic strategic feature of the German plan in case of a multi-front-war – to focus on France first, beat her quickly and decisively, then to shuttle the bulk of German forces to the east to confront the Russians – he accepted the Habsburg army's role implicit in the German plan. Austro-Hungarian forces would have to counter the Russian advance into Central Europe in the first weeks of war by an offensive that would pin down the enemy's troops. With only a small segment of the German field army operating in the eastern theater, it would be an uphill struggle. In return for the Habsburg army's efforts, the German troops in East Prussia were supposed to attack the Russians operating further south. Whether the Great General Staff had actually promised to launch an offensive in the direction of Siedlce in Russian [Poland](#) would become a bone of contention during and after the First World War, as Conrad blamed the defeats in late summer 1914 against the Russians on the German failure to keep their promise.^[15]

Coordination – or a lack thereof – with the Germans proved to be a weakness of war planning but it was neither unusual for the alliances of pre-war Europe nor was it the only problem Conrad and his General Staff had to face when dealing with Russia. By 1912, the rebuilding of Russian military capabilities after the [catastrophe of 1904-1905](#) had reached a point where Austria-Hungary's numerical inferiority could no longer be compensated for by faster deployment, better trained troops, or superior leadership. The focus on morale, already mentioned as a guiding principle of war preparations, allowed for some delusive self-congratulation and inspired hopes to deal the tsar's army severe blows in the opening campaigns of a war. There was also the reasonable fear that Austria-Hungary would be outnumbered by two to one. Improved Russian mobilization and [railway transport](#) to the war theater had almost abrogated the deployment head-start on which Austro-Hungarian planners had always relied since the days of Beck. The extensive railway construction program and the expansion of the defense budget did not go unnoticed in Vienna, but the breakdown of the Habsburg Monarchy's military [espionage](#) network in Russia in the wake of Colonel [Alfred Redl's \(1864-1913\)](#) betrayal made it difficult to assess stages of war preparedness and to calculate accordingly in time of crisis.^[16]

Fear of Russia's immense reservoir of manpower, allegiance to the agreement with Germany, and the deeply held conviction that only by seizing the initiative would there be a chance to prevail made swift offensive operations imperative. Two directions seemed to be possible for the opening campaigns, either northwards between the Vistula and the Bug rivers or towards Dubno and Rovno to the northeast. In both cases, flanks were at risk in case of forceful Russian attacks. In 1914, Conrad opted for an initial northward offensive that could be launched before B-Group would be ready to take action in Galicia. If successful, it would have been followed by an eastward turn of the left wing and an encounter with Russian forces to the northeast. Due to the defeat in Battle of Lemberg ([L'viv or Lwów](#)) (28 August–11 September 1914) this operational concept became obsolete quite quickly and major parts of Galicia were overrun by the Russians. Playing for time to keep B-Group in the southeast for an attack on Serbia as long as possible, Conrad had made an early northeastward offensive unfeasible.^[17]

Conclusion: The Limits of War Planning

With the failed offensives of Austria-Hungary against Russia and Serbia and the German defeat in the [Battle of the Marne](#), winning the war in a couple of months became impossible. For a long war, adequate financial and economic preparations were missing but at least some precautions had been implemented or discussed in the last months of peace. A special credit of 2,556 million *Kronen* (Crowns) would help to cover mobilization costs. There were discussions about other important measures to deal with the financial effects of a war, like a long-term financial plan or a war chest, but by summer 1914, nothing of that sort had yet been accomplished. Economic planning was not much different. Inspired by debates in Germany, Austrian entrepreneurs

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suggested precautionary measures in 1912 and government officials began to ponder ways to organize food supplies in wartime. But the Habsburg Monarchy was still missing anything that would come close to a coherent plan for an “economic mobilization” in July 1914. With regard to the legal system, war preparations were in place before the outbreak of the Great War. Laws that regulated the suspension of civil rights, including property rights, and handed civilian and military authorities sweeping powers to suppress anything that might lead to political, social or economic instability, had passed legislation by the end of 1912 ([War Requirements Acts](#), or *Kriegsleistungsgesetze*).^[18]

In its achievements as in its shortcomings, Austria-Hungary’s war preparations were far from unusual. Civilian oversight of military plans seemed out of the question and even Emperor Francis Joseph and Archduke Franz Ferdinand refrained from questioning the strategic and operational rationale of the General Staff. While planning became more professionalized, concepts and mechanisms of control and co-ordination were lagging behind. Although the “short war illusion” might not have been as widely shared among military and political leaders as many scholars had believed until recently, war plans were still focused on preparing for decisive action in the first few months of fighting.^[19] In the case of the Habsburg Monarchy, a lack of resources in the face of numerous strategic threats was meant to be compensated for by German support and by smart planning and daring operations. A culture of over-ambitious military leadership flourished under the auspices of Conrad and backfired in 1914 with disastrous consequences. This kind of bias was the norm among Europe’s military elites, but Austria-Hungary could ill-afford the losses of failed offensives in the opening campaigns of the First World War.

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Notes

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